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Advice for a Troubled Teen

By RON BERLERMAY 10, 2014

THE eighth-grade boy I mentor had been suspended for calling his substitute teacher a bitch, loudly enough that a teacher's aide heard. Until this incident, he had been making real progress with his behavior problems in school. He had vastly improved since sixth grade, when suspensions were a regular part of his life. He disrupted class, taunted boys and hit girls. In seventh grade, his behavior, if not his schoolwork, had slowly improved.

He had worked for almost a year to rebuild his reputation, and now, with one stupid act last October, he had undone it all.

"Forget for the moment that you spoke so loudly, the teacher's aide overheard you," I said. "Why did you do it? Was the substitute mean to you?"

"No," he answered, ducking his head. We were alone, seated in the cafeteria in his Norwalk, Conn., school. The assistant principal had temporarily released him from the detention room, thinking that meeting with me might do him some good. I've been his volunteer mentor, trying to teach him to make good life decisions, since he was in fourth grade.

Credit Keith Negley

“Then why?” I repeated.

“I was trying to get a laugh from my classmates,” he said.

“So, did they think it was funny?”

“No,” he admitted.

“What did your parents say?”

“My mom just told me not to do it again.”

“What about your dad?”

“He didn’t say anything.”

“They didn’t punish you?” I asked.

“No,” he answered.

I can’t say I was surprised. As far back as fifth grade his mother had confessed to me that she had given up on trying to control his behavior. Her husband, she said, worked long hours as a day laborer, was seldom home to dispense discipline and in any event preferred to leave that aspect of parenting to her. The boy and his streetwise sister, then in second grade, were more than she could handle. Knowing this, the elementary school principal had ceased suspending the boy, and instead had made him pass the day doing classwork in his office. “Sending him home is like giving him a vacation,” the principal said. “He’ll spend the day playing video games.”

Now in eighth grade, the boy seldom did his homework and often goofed around rather than pay attention in class. His fall-semester report card was a rain of D’s, D-minuses and one F. The shame of it is, he is not dumb. Far from it. Most of his teachers said he could earn B’s with better behavior and improved effort. And yet he was satisfied. “If you get two F’s, you have to go to summer school,” he said. “I only got one.”

I was at a loss as to how to help him. I had been visiting him weekly at school for several years through a program administered by Norwalk’s Human Services Council, sometimes playing with him, sometimes helping him with his school work, forever trying to guide him toward making better life choices. Often, I left frustrated.

Then I happened to travel to Danville Correctional Center, a medium- security prison for men in central Illinois, to speak with prisoners enrolled in an education program run by a University of Illinois professor. Many of the 75 or so in attendance were in for murders they’d committed when just four or five years older than my mentee.

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The prisoners ranged in age from their mid-20s to their early 60s. They had gotten beyond the mix of rage, depression, confusion and self-pity that initially consumes many of those serving long sentences, and had determined to make use of their remaining prison time. They'd decided to resume their education, which most had neglected while growing up. "Not to pursue a degree, because we don't currently offer that," said Rebecca Ginsburg, the professor who runs the Education Justice Project, the organization that administers the program. "They do it for the value they see in it."

One of them, Orlando Mayorga, 34, is a Mexican-American from Cicero, Ill., serving a 40-year sentence for a murder he committed while he was a gang member at 17. With time served and credit for good behavior, he will be eligible for parole in three years. He's hopeful, with the classes he is taking, that he will find employment counseling at-risk individuals upon his eventual release.

Three years ago Mr. Mayorga became a teacher in Language Partners, a prisoner-led bilingual education program overseen by the Education Justice Project that teaches English to non-English-speaking Danville prisoners, along with leadership and post-incarceration job skills. His impetus was the number of prisoners unable to read letters written to them by their children.

When Mr. Mayorga learned that my mentee was also Mexican-American, and was toying with the idea of joining a gang ("but only part time"), he took it upon himself to write to the boy. Most in the Education Justice Program had been gang members when they had committed their crimes. According to Department of Justice National Gang Center statistics, in 2011 there were an estimated 782,500 gang members in the United States, roughly 35 percent of whom were younger than 18. Mr. Mayorga hoped to discourage the boy I tutored from following his path.

"What's good, carnalito?" he wrote. "I heard you're out there hanging with the big boys doing what gangsters do. I also heard you want to be part of that gangster life. That's a big decision you're about to make, homie. I was faced with the same decision when I was young. I joined a gang when I was in 8th grade." He added, "I got stabbed, and I got shot all before I turned 16. All this might sound cool because when I was your age it was cool for me, but getting stabbed and shot hurts like hell, and being in jail isn't fun either.

"At the time I just didn't understand how my choices affected more than just me," he wrote. "It is only when you end up in a really messed up place that you start thinking about things."

"The saddest part," Mr. Mayorga continued, "is not that we end up in jail or dead. The saddest part is the people we hurt because of our decisions. The ones who really suffer are our families, bro. My jefita has cried a lot for me. I know you care about your family," he concluded, "but saying it is a lot different than showing it."

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With his mother's permission, the boy wrote back. "I'm going to try to do better in school," he promised.

If he has, it's hard to tell. His grades have yet to improve. But since then he has pretty much stayed out of trouble. In December, he asked if I'd get him a Penn State wool beanie for Christmas.

"You want to go there?" I asked. The boy had never mentioned college before. Neither his father nor his mother had progressed beyond middle school.

"I like the football team, and the colors," he said.

O.K., I thought. It's a start.

Ron Berler is the author of "Raising the Curve: A Year Inside One of America's 45,000* Failing Public Schools."